

And on This Farm She Found a Future

Agriculture is a backbreaking, low-paying, male-dominated field. I wouldn't want any other job.

BY NANCY BRILL

THE FARMER HAD A TANNED face, weathered from working in the hot sun and dry air. He took in my clean appearance and small, unmuscular body. "So," he said, "you like to get dirty?"

It was 1998. After working as a cashier for three summers at a local farm during high school, I was moving from behind the register to the seat of a tractor, which I would be maneuvering through the farm's 100-acre vegetable fields. I would be working long hours in the heat of New Jersey's humid summers. I knew I would get dirty—and I couldn't wait.

I wasn't disappointed. When the ground was dry, the field dust caked my skin with a brown film, streaked by the sweat that trickled down my neck. The stickiest job on the farm was grading tomatoes, but I couldn't care less if juice from rotten tomatoes was running down my legs and into my shoes as long as I was in the shade of the barn. During my lunch breaks I lined up at the local deli, where crews of workers seemed to gather like fruit flies on Jersey tomatoes, wearing my baseball hat and clothes so filthy I looked like Pigpen from "Peanuts." The work was tiring, but not exhausting, and I ended each day eager to do it all over again for 10 hours a day, six days a week.

The challenges of farming were not just physical. As a fieldworker on a farm, I was a minority: a woman in a man's profession. Less than 1 percent of Americans claim farming as an occupation, and of those farmers, only 27 percent are women. Although I always felt more comfortable fitting in as "one of the guys" growing up (I traded in my Barbie dolls

for a fishing rod a long time ago), I still received comments at work such as "I've never seen a woman work so hard before," and "Women don't sweat. They glow." (If so, I must be a 1,000-watt light bulb.)

When I drove the tractor for agri-tourism events such as pumpkin-picking



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hayrides, middle-aged men would take one look at me and question my driving skills. I'd politely smile and say that I'd try not to dump them into the lake on the way to the pumpkin patch.

My family was skeptical about my career path as well. Despite my attraction to farming, my dad often reminded me to choose a job where I would work with my head and not with my hands. He had witnessed his father struggle to support his

family as a welder, and wanted an easier life for me. But as much as I respected my dad's words of wisdom, I could not give up my passion for farming and enjoying the fruits of my labor.

When I went to college I had several opportunities to obtain internships related to my major. But something kept enticing me back to those fields every summer to work. Maybe it was a way for me to escape the crowded metropolitan area where my parents lived. After all, the farm was an island in the midst of suburban development. Or perhaps it was rewarding to know that I was helping to preserve the American tradition of farming.

The more time I spent on the farm, the more it influenced my life in a positive way. As the plow turned new soil each spring, I cultivated the love of the farm boy I worked

with, whom I eventually married after several years of dating. While working on the farm I also became aware of the importance of community-farmer interactions. I gave farm tours to inner-city school groups who were amazed to see how tomatoes, corn and peppers grew. After college I went to graduate school to study agricultural production. I now combine hard work and brains in my job conducting plant-pathology research on vegetable crops at Rutgers University. Unfortunately, there are still times when I am challenged about my choice to study agriculture. Someone once asked me, "Why would you want to go into agriculture? It's a dying field that's not going anywhere." I told that person that despite cultural, religious, political and economic differences worldwide, people in every country have one thing in common: we eat. It is a dirty job, but someone has got to help feed them.

Before graduate school I was warned that this was not a job for those who expect to get paid a lot of money. So why have I pursued a career in agriculture, considering that I'm on a dirty road less traveled by women where I am at risk from skin cancer, back strains and sweat stains? Maybe it is because I have dedicated myself to a job where I strive to improve agricultural practices for farmers and the natural world. Or maybe it's because along the way I have been told that I clean up nicely.

BRILL lives in Cherry Hill, N.J.

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